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# Political Theology and Comedy: Žižek through Rose Tinted Glasses

Marcus Pound

## Abstract:

This paper defends the centrality of comedy as paradigmatic of political theology by reading the project of Slavoj Žižek through the lens of the late British philosopher Gillian Rose. I begin by exploring Rose's recovery of Hegel as means to make good on Marxist social critique with particular reference to her non-foundational or 'speculative reading' of Hegel. I then explore the degree to which her work stands in advance of Žižek's project, arguing that it is her work that makes his project possible in the first place. I turn next to the reception of Hegel and comedy, and in particular the place Rose awards comedy in Hegel's work, before exploring the central differences between Rose and Žižek's work: law verses the symbolic, and the respective shapes of their political theology. Returning to Rose's remarks on comedy *qua* law I ask in the final analysis: how should we understand the relationship between political theology and comedy? Rose I suggest offers a coherent alternative to Žižek whilst retaining nonetheless the commitment to Hegelian-Marxist social theory.

**Key words:** Žižek, Gillian Rose, Hegel, Comedy, Political Theology

Comedy has long served as a political virtue, not least in the form of satire. To draw upon Grigoris Sifakis, under the shield of democratic rule and freedom of speech satire is able to direct its arrow, away from private adversarial combat, and toward the public figure, a feature which deems it a democratic responsibility and public service.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind one might applaud the recent edited collection *Žižek's Jokes: Did you hear the one about Hegel and negation?* Yet arguably this work has stretched the patience of some critical reviewers: As Robert Eaglestone has argued (while nonetheless giving credence to Žižek's earlier work as 'full of insight and intellectual synthesis') 'the publisher's phrase is that many of the jokes are 'nicely vulgar'. In my view this means that lots of the so-called jokes are just plain racist or anti-Semitic, many are pretty sexist, and some are downright misogynistic.' Žižek is accused of 'lazy academic prose, very questionable 'jokes' and wearing a jester's hat for the intellectual bourgeoisie [which] probably isn't how the revolution will happen.'<sup>2</sup>

1 Sifakis 2006, p. 23.

2 Eaglestone 2014.

At the back of this lies the charge that philosophy is being bought into disrepute. As Todd McGowen puts it: 'a general lack of seriousness predominates across the spectrum of theorizing today.'<sup>3</sup> However, in defence McGowen has argued: 'One dimension of Žižek's seriousness is his commitment to the joke. Žižek's focus on jokes is important not because it indicates his own pathological need to be considered funny—it might or it might not—but because it testifies to his refusal to relegate comedy to a position external to theory. He jokes seriously.'<sup>4</sup> And 'Only in theoretical seriousness does the possibility exist for us to give up the quest for a truth based on knowledge and to embrace a truth of non-knowledge [non-All] that structures our being. But first we must recognize that the path to seriousness is strewn with jokes.'<sup>5</sup>

In what follows I wish also to defend more generally the centrality of comedy as a theo-political virtue, but doing so by reading Žižek through the lens of Gillian Rose. Rose is by no means an arbitrary choice. As I further wish to argue, her non-foundational reading of Hegel paved the way for Žižek's work<sup>6</sup> and many of her criticisms of postmodernism serve in advance of Žižek's; in particular the critical relation between comedy, politics, and theology. This affords us the possibility to gain a further critical standpoint on Žižek's work within a shared framework of thought.

I begin by exploring Rose's recovery of Hegel as means to make good on Marxist social critique with particular reference to her non-foundational or 'speculative reading' of Hegel. I then explore the degree to which her work stands in advance of Žižek's project, arguing that it is her work that makes his project possible in the first place. I turn next to the reception of Hegel and comedy, and in particular the place Rose awards comedy in Hegel's work before exploring the central differences between Rose and Žižek's work: law versus the symbolic, and the respective shapes of their political theology. Returning to Rose's remarks on comedy *qua* law I ask in the final analysis: how should we understand the relationship between political theology and comedy? Rose I suggest offers a coherent alternative to Žižek whilst retaining

3 Gowan 2007, p. 58.

4 Gowan 2007, p. 66.

5 Gowan 2007, p. 66.

6 More recently, at the Conference Žižek in response to a question about the significance of Gillian Rose's thought affirmed the 'Broken Middle' as a key critical category.

nonetheless the commitment to Hegelian-Marxist social theory.

### Rose and Marxism and Hegel

The reception of political theology in recent years has arguably contributed to growing scholarly consensus on the significance of Gillian Rose. One of England's foremost continental philosophers she was instrumental in the reception thereof during the eighties and nineties before she succumbed to ovarian cancer. Her early work covered Adorno, the Frankfurt School, and the legacy of Marxism; she was instrumental developing a post-foundational reading of Hegel and the development of sociological reason, and she was a powerful critic of much post-structuralism and postmodern theory. In her later work she extolled the classical virtues, inviting her readers to consider what is left for philosophy when it has discredited 'eternity, reason, truth, representation, justice, freedom, beauty and the Good.'<sup>7</sup>

Rose's early work took up the challenges of Theodore Adorno and the debates of the Frankfurt School during the 70s.<sup>8</sup> The crux of Rose's critique of Adorno centred on the neo-Marxist legacy of 'reification' developed by Lukács which broadly speaking describes the process by which commodity exchange represents social relations of value as if they were a natural property of the commodity.<sup>9</sup> According to Rose 'Reification has often been used in order to generalize the theory of value and of commodity fetishism without taking up the theory of surplus value or any theory of class formation and without developing any theory of power and the state.'<sup>10</sup> Marx's theory of value is 'generalised as 'reification' with minimal reference to the actual productive relations between men, and without any identification of a social subject.'<sup>11</sup> In short Rose argues that in generalising Marx's theory of value to apply more broadly to culture, many of the neo-Marxists sold Marxist theory short and hence undermined the potential of critique to conceptualise social inequality.

If her early work on Adorno attempted to recover the critical potential of Marx for social theory, her subsequent work on Hegel

7 Rose 1996, p. 1.

8 For an example of the critical reception of the work see Smith 1982, pp. 463-464.

9 In particular see György Lukács's essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat'

10 Rose 2014, p. 36.

11 Rose 2014, p. 183.

attempted to recover the critical potential of Hegel for Marx and sociology more generally. In *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Rose argued that the historical development of social theory/sociology in all its variants, including the Marxism of the Frankfurt School, remained captive to German neo-Kantianism, manifest in the way Kantian scepticism reproduces a series of philosophical dichotomies within sociological reason: the Kantian split between subjective freedom and objective unfreedom, law and morality is repeated in the sociological split between values and validity, or meaning/value (Weber) and structure/facts (Durkheim).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, as Vincent Lloyd puts it, Kant's distinction between the empirical and a set of transcendental presuppositions leaves the latter unaccountable to the former, so to take an example: 'Durkheim took 'society' to exist in the transcendental register and then applied the category of 'society' to his investigation of the empirical world without allowing the empirical world to feed back into his understanding of society.'<sup>13</sup>

And herein lies the overall thrust of her critical enquiry which would mark all subsequent work: according to Rose, Hegel's critique of Kant provides in advance a critique of sociological method and the means 'to link the analysis of the economy to comprehension of the conditions for revolutionary practice.'<sup>14</sup> Where neo-Kantian sociology is epistemological in approach, Hegel provides the resources for a historical and phenomenological approach which takes into account a reason which is motile and able to reflect precisely on its own presuppositions. Hence, as with her critique of Adorno, the issue can put in terms of a sociological approach which is able to take the conditions of emerging social life contextually and aporetically.

Given the general critique being levelled at Hegel in the climate of French post-structuralism the book remains remarkable both for its embrace of Hegel, and in particular her post-foundational reading of Hege.<sup>15</sup> As she would later put it in the introduction to *Dialectic of Nihilism*

Hegelian and Marxist dialectic does not seek to legitimise the

12 Rose 1995, pp. 1-13.

13 Lloyd 2011, p. 19.

14 Rose 1995, p. 220. For a critical appreciation of Rose's relation to Marx see Gorman 2001, pp. 25-36.

15 See for example Derrida *Glas* 1974. Galilee, 1974. Significantly the text also leaves the reader n with a quote from Hegel on comedy.

phantasy of historical completion with the imprimatur of supra-historical, absolute method, but focuses relentlessly on the historical production and reproduction of those illusionary contraries which other systems of scientific thought naturalise, absolutize, or deny.<sup>16</sup>

On Rose's reading Absolute Spirit amounts to cultural totality which includes metaphysics and religion, and rather than view Hegel as offering us history as the teleological unfolding of the Absolute, her Hegel follows the owl of Minerva, setting wing only after dusk; i.e. philosophy always arrives too late.

In *Hegel contra Sociology* this reading is underpinned by the significance she develops of Hegel's 'speculative proposition' for social theory. To read a proposition 'speculatively' means that 'the identity which is affirmed between subject and predicate is seen equally to affirm a lack of identity between subject and predicate.' In other words, in reading a given proposition one should not assume the identity of the given subject as already contained in the predicate, but rather see it as a work, something to be 'achieved'.<sup>17</sup>

For example, she claims the principle speculative relation is between religion and the state; i.e. *the* modern antinomy. Read simply, the identity of religion and state would be to imply either a theocracy, or to imply the idealist goals of religion as something to which politics should aspire to reach (e.g. social harmony). However, read speculatively the point is that the very distinction between the two speaks of the very gap within the foundation of those concepts themselves.

Hence the significance Rose attributes to rethinking Hegel's Absolute as the basis for social critique.<sup>18</sup> To think the Absolute in this regard is to say that we need a speculative reading which traces the historical trajectories of the forms of freedom, art, and religions, from Greek ethical life to Christian morality and out of which our current cultures have emerged.

Her final paragraph in *Hegel contra Sociology* is an invitation to 'expound capitalism as a culture', i.e. to take up the Marxist critique in a way that secures it's potential for social critique in contrast to

16 Rose 1984, p. 3.

17 Rose 1995, p. 49.

18 Rose 1995, p. 208.

the neo-Marxist legacy. Indeed, she insists that ‘a presentation of the contradictory relations between Capital and culture is the only way to link the analysis of the economy to the comprehension of the conditions for revolutionary practice’.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows I want to argue that her invitation should be read as a programmatic statement of Žižek’s entire project: to revive German idealism, and Hegel’s work particular [albeit via Lacan] as a means to radicalise Marx’s critique of ideology? This takes the shape of a non-foundational and comedic reading of Hegel as the basis for political theology.

Žižek and Rose

Žižek’s non-foundational approach to Hegel is encapsulated in his earliest publications such *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) where he claims: ‘Hegelian ‘reconciliation’ is not a ‘panlogistic’ sublation of all reality in the Concept but a final consent to the fact that the Concept itself is ‘not-all’ (i.e. speculative).<sup>20</sup> Yet the instrumental role Rose played was only evident a year later in *For They Know Not What They No* when he admonished the reader to ‘grasp the fundamental paradox of the speculative identity as it was recently restated by Gillian Rose: in the dialectical judgement of identity, the mark of identity between its subject and predicate designates only and precisely the specific modality of their *lack of identity*.<sup>21</sup> Žižek adopts Rose’s speculative reading of Hegel’s thesis on Substance as Subject; Substance as Subject means: ‘that non-truth, error, is inherent to Truth itself – to resume Rose’s perspicacious formula again, that Substance ‘is untrue as Subject’. This means; their very lack of identity [...] (the gap separating the Subject from Substance) is strictly correlative to the inherent non-identity, split of the Substance itself.’<sup>22</sup> So while in distinction to Rose Žižek reads the split subject of Lacan back into Hegel, it is Rose who opens up the possibility of doing such by offering a speculative reading of Hegel in the first place. For example, one might compare the following paragraphs from Rose and Žižek respectively:

19        Rose 1995, p. 220.  
20        Žižek 1989, p. 6.  
21        Žižek 1991, p. 103.  
22        Žižek 1991, p. 105.

the separation out of otherness as such is derived from the failure of mutual recognition on the part of two- self-consciousness who encounter each other and refuse to recognise the other as itself a self-relation: the other is never simply other, but an implicated self-relation.<sup>23</sup>

[The] ultimate insight of Dialectics is neither the all-encompassing One which contains / mediates / sublates all differences, nor the explosion of multitudes [...] but the split of the One into Two. This split has nothing whatsoever to do with the premodern notion of [...] a Whole comprised of two opposed forces or principles [...] rather [it] designates a ‘split which cleaves the One from within, not into two parts: the ultimate split is not between two halves, but between Something and Nothing, between the One and the Void of its Place [...] -or, in other words, the opposition between the One and its Outside is reflected back into the very identity of the One.’<sup>24</sup>

The similarities in their readings go some way to explain their shared antipathy to postmodern ethics: they work too often within a self/ other dichotomy without transposing the very distinction back into the subject itself [*spaltung*].

What then of Marx? As noted, Rose believed that the treatment of reification in post-Marxist thought failed to adequately account for the theory of surplus value in the theory of value and of commodity fetishism. What Lacan provides Žižek with is a means to make good on Rose’s concern. While Lacan initially claimed that Marx’s surplus value (i.e. the excess value produced by commodity exchange) finds its psychoanalytical counterpart in surplus enjoyment (i.e. *jouissance*), Žižek develops the argument: capitalism is sustained and ‘stained’ by a self-generating excess which renders the system incomplete. Only rather than mask or hide away this excess, it elevates it to the principle of social life: money begets more money. Hence the emergent social forms under capitalism can be said to arise historically at the point when surplus enjoyment/lack becomes the social principle as a whole – the superego imperative of capitalism to enjoy, mastering the drive to consume in the endless circulation of desire.<sup>25</sup> Žižek thereby shows the necessary

23        Rose 1996, p. 74.  
24        Žižek 1996, p. xxvi.  
25        See Calderbank 2014 who has provided a helpful summary of Žižek’s work in this regard.

supplement of psychoanalysis in the challenge to expound the link between capitalism and culture in a way which Rose was unable.

If we take then their shared consensus on the speculative relation, and their concern for a revitalised Marx we can readily appreciate their mutual distrust of the post-secular twist Derrida gave Marx. As Žižek says, 'One of the most deplorable aspects of the postmodern era and its so-called 'thought' is the return of the religious dimension in all its different guises: From Christian and other fundamentalisms, through the multitude of New Age spiritualisms, up to the emerging religious sensitivity within deconstruction itself (the so-called 'post-secular' thought).'<sup>26</sup> Žižek's contention is precisely the extent it precludes the possibility of a political act (to which I shall return).

Rose herself had invited Derrida to speak at Warwick University where he delivered 'Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International' (1993). Derrida's paper served as a prelude to his engagement with the *spectres of Marx*, a topic he had resisted approaching for some time. Yet as Rose argues, this is less a work of mourning as an '*aberration of mourning*'.<sup>27</sup> Derrida twists Marx's famous opening to *the Communist Manifesto* into a metaphor for what remains undeconstructable: the spirit of a Justice to come. At this point she takes up the concerns with Marxism that characterised her early studies of Adorno and Hegel. Derrida she argues, in spiritualising Marx disregards 'the body of Marxism...Class structure, class consciousness and class struggle, the party, the laws of capitalist accumulation, the theory of value, human practical activity. All (but justice) is vanity in Derrida's reading, 'mirror-images of the rigidities of logocentricism'.<sup>28</sup> As Rose puts it: 'Derrida has forgotten Marx's materialism and Hegel's *Logic*',<sup>29</sup> and the messianic aspect of Marxism which Derrida rescues is but 'correlate of this missing impetus.' All of this is said to stem from Derrida's '*logophobia*', 'a sub-rational pseudo-Messianism' which disqualifies both 'critical reflection and political practice. It is a counsel of hopelessness which extols Messianic hope'.<sup>30</sup>

26 Žižek 2001, p. 1.

27 Rose 1996, p. 65.

28 Rose 1996, p. 66.

29 Rose 1996, p. 67.

30 Rose 1996, p. 70.

In sum, both Žižek and Rose adopt a non-foundational approach to Hegel, which is to say both adopt the speculative standpoint in such a way as to revive the basis of a Marxist critique. In particular, Žižek resists with Rose the post-secular turn in favour of a model which takes serious the notion of surplus value and class relations.

### The comedy of Hegel

As Rose says: 'Marxism ignored the comedy of Hegel'.<sup>31</sup> Whereas Kierkegaard employed humour in his critique of Hegel<sup>32</sup> to short circuit any anxiety on the part of a student in the face of *the System* and its metaphysical hubris, Rose employs comedy 'to provide a route into his [Hegel's] thinking which bypasses the mines of prejudice concerning Hegel as a metaphysical thinker'.<sup>33</sup> In this way she aims to convince of the significance of the speculative standpoint as a means to make good on Marxist social critique. For Rose, Hegel should be read as a comic thinker. In this way Rose pits Kierkegaard against Kierkegaard in the name of Hegel, thereby highlighting the proximity of the two thinkers.

Arguably there is a historical precedence for the 'comic' reading of the *Phenomenology*. As Mark Roche has argued, the view that tragedy in Hegel is the highest of the dramatic forms is widespread, yet this is a 20<sup>th</sup> Century quirk.<sup>34</sup> Hegelian scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century such as Christian Weisse, Arnold Ruge, and Karl Rosenkranz – largely forgotten now – by contrast were more likely to focus on comedy.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, comedy has the last word in Hegel's *Aesthetics*.<sup>36</sup>

According Roche, Hegel's own theory of comedy is linked to his understanding of subjectivity: 'What is comical... is the subjectivity that

31 Rose 1996, p. 64.

32 Consider for example the following extract from Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*: 'A thinker erects a huge building, a system, a system embracing the whole of existence, world history, etc., and if his personal life is considered, to our amazement the appalling and ludicrous discovery is made that he himself does not live in this huge, domed palace, but in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best in the janitor's quarters' (43-44).

33 Rose 1996, p. 12.

34 See Roche 1998. Indeed, the argument may be extended in part to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. David Farrell Krell for example has argued more recently – and especially in regard of Schelling and Hölderlin – that German Idealism more generally is caught within a 'double movement': the rise of tragedy in the aesthetics, and the tragic fall of the absolute, skilfully highlighting the link between the two. Krell, 2005, p. 1.

35 Roche 1998, p. 306.

36 Roche 2001, p. 411.



makes its own actions contradictory and so brings them to nothing.<sup>37</sup> By subjectivity is meant, the elevation of self-consciousness as opposed to objectivity (i.e. cultural norms). Hegel links comedy to the rise of subjectivity – comedy stages the battle between on the one hand moral customs and law (objective) and the subject for whom moral customs are no longer the highest. Hegel's use of comedy emphasises the role of contradiction and need for resolution. As Roche says 'In a sense comedy functions as an aesthetic analogue to Hegel's practice of immanent critique, by which the philosopher seeks to unveil self-contradictory and thus self- cancelling positions.'<sup>38</sup> Comedy is a form of 'immanent negation' <sup>39</sup>(Roche's translation) – what is negated is the false elevation of subjectivity or particularly (e.g. the man who slips on a banana skin while his thoughts are set upon the stars).<sup>40</sup>

Roche's approach develops comedy as a category within the trajectory of Hegel's work as a whole, as if this was what Hegel *would* have said had he himself further developed the category; Roche thereby adopts a foundational approach to Hegel's work. By contrast Alenka Zupan i 's book on Hegelian comedy *The Odd One In* while underlining Hegel's discussion of comedy *qua* representation and the historical development of drama in the *Phenomenology* adopts the non-foundational reading of Hegel which is developed in tandem with Lacan. Here the approach is meta-theoretical, framed by the distinction between a Kantian or Hegelian framework, and an associated question: at what point is a joke inherently transgressive or truly transgressive? The former implies a joke which is transgressive of a situation but which nonetheless helps confers stability on that situation – for example, the libidinal joke employed to release the tension of a situation and hence maintain the situation. The latter implies a joke which is able to offer an entirely new perspective on the given situation. This argument is developed with a materialist thrust: if jokes have traditionally been on the side of materialism (and hence anti-theological), usurping the universal in favour of the particular (i.e. jokes target the false elevation of subjectivity as in the example of the man slipping on the banana skin), her point is that these jokes don't go far enough. A joke may bring

37 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, quoted in Roche 2001, p. 412.

38 Roche 2001, p. 415.

39 Roche 2001, p. 415.

40 For Kierkegaard for whom it was the false elevation of objectivity which marked comedy.

us back to earth with a thud, but it still leaves the possibilities of the heavens intact. Recalling Rose's thesis it could be said that Zupan i finds in Hegelian logic first: a critique in advance of the type of comedy which relies on a residue Kantian transcendentalism; second, a means to reinvigorate Marxist materialism with Lacanian ontology through the release their thought forms give from transcendence (what Lacan called the non-All).<sup>41</sup>

What concerns Rose is 'not what Hegel says about comedy as such, but *the movement of the Absolute as comedy*'; a meta-theoretical approach which, like Roche and Zupan i sees comedy as constitutive of the system. How so? As Rose says:

Let me shoot from the pistol: first, *spirit* in the *Phenomenology* means the *drama of misrecognition* which ensures at every stage and transition of the work – a ceaseless comedy, according to which our aims and outcomes constantly mismatch each other, and provoke yet another revised aim, action and discordant outcome." Secondly, *reason* is therefore *comic*, full of surprises, of unanticipated happenings, so that the comprehension is always provisional and preliminary.<sup>42</sup>

For example, one can imagine a situation in which a chance encounter between a couple leads to a romance which ends in marriage, such that chance leads to a harmonic reconciliation – the protagonists imagine themselves as agents of action; but their subjectivity is shown to be illusory, chance is at play. The goal however reveals that only when our natural inclinations are thwarted is the true goal revealed – what Hegel called the cunning of reason.<sup>43</sup>

What all this points to is the suggestion that it is not that the *Phenomenology* is not funny, merely that we need to perceive the inherent comedy when the speculative standpoint is addressed. To take an example which both Rose and Žižek consider, Hegel's chapter 'the animal spiritual conceit'.<sup>44</sup> As Rose points out, the very title is comic in as much the contradiction gives rise the speculative relation. The animal spiritual is premonition of the false dilemma of the modern state – rights

41 Zupančič 2008.

42 Rose 1996, p. 72.

43 See also Roche 2001, p. 415.

44 Rose 1996, p. 75

of individuals and rights of state. Where someone acts in the name of one's subjective right on the basis that it is universal, when what is really at stake is his or hers own self-interest. Comedy arises out of the contradiction, i.e. when individual rights are the means to employ a supra-individual power such that ethical substance (objective freedom) migrates to the hapless subject.<sup>45</sup>

Law and the Symbolic

At this point one should attend to Rose and Žižek's differences. If there remains a significant difference between their approaches it can be summed up in terms of the difference between law or jurisprudence and the symbolic. Rose's interest in jurisprudence surfaces in her middling to later work, and in particular in conversation with the post-structural approaches of Derrida and Foucault, taking centre stage finally in *The Broken Middle*. Briefly put, Rose argues that jurisprudence was a central concern of the philosophical tradition from Kant onwards, yet post-structuralism abandons both reason and law in the name of the end of metaphysics, without appreciating the ways in which those self-same thought forms remains indebted to the terms of its engagement and series of conceptual antinomies. As she says in her introduction:

This essay is an attempt to retrieve and rediscover a tradition which has been tendentiously and meretriciously 'deconstructed' [...] This destruction of knowledge is justified by its perpetrators as the only way to escape the utopian projections and historicist assumptions of dialectic; 'eternal repetition of the same' is said to be a harder truth than the false and discredited promise of reconciliation. Yet neither the form of this hard truth nor the terms in which it is expressed are neutral: they are always borrowed from some historically identifiable epoch of juridical experience.<sup>46</sup>

Another way to grasp the significance of law for Rose is in terms of the persistent line of her critical enquiry which is to develop critical theory which resists transcendental arguments regarding society in favour of a logic which can reflect on its own presuppositions. Law is the term for Rose which re-establishes the field of social critique.

45 Hoff 2014, p. 235 ff9.

46 Rose 1984, p. 1.

Rose took the rhetoric of post-structuralism to be highly critical of reason, thereby precluding the power of thought to criticise its own concepts. For example, Foucault reduces knowledge to power in such a way as to evade the claims of a rational critique. Similarly, Derrida's grammatology stages the usurpation of law and reason through the practices of writing while relegating ethics to a fetishized 'other'. And in social terms, because both Derrida and Foucault underwrite their philosophy with Nietzsche they usurp the basis of social theory in favour of the sheer arbitrary imposition of power, the consequence of which compounds the abandonment of reason in the embrace of nihilism.

Recalling her thesis in *Hegel contra Sociology*, it can be said that the postmodern inscription of power works as a Kantian transcendental, even at the point Derrida and Foucault critique Kant. For example, for all their problematizing of an *arche* or *telos*, foundational beginnings or Utopia ends, it is the middle which is evaded, the irresolvable aporia which arises between the universal and particular, politics and ethics, rhetoric and reason, at the bar of Law.

In developing her concept of law she turned to Kierkegaard and Freud amongst others to excavate what she calls the 'middle' – shorthand for the speculative standpoint. The *Broken Middle* offers a way of thinking about politics and ethics, the universal and the singular. The 'middle' is a third space, not a unitary space (e.g. the neutral space of secular liberalism) but a place of anxiety to the extent it is the sheer 'givenness' of the political and ethical situation which resists the retreat into sanctified beginnings or utopian ends. It is not a matter of employing political or ethical solutions to unify society's diremptions [divorce] such as law/ethics, the very fields arise already out of the process of diremption.<sup>47</sup> Her aim then is to recover anxiety within our political and ethical discourse, 're-assigning it to the middle.'<sup>48</sup>

For the reasons above, Rose remained critical of the Lacanian symbolic.<sup>49</sup> Law is not '*the superior term* which supresses the local and contingent, nor is it *the symbolic* which catches every child in the closed circuit of its patriarchal embrace. The law is the falling towards or away from mutual recognition, the triune relationship, the middle formed or

47 Rose 1992, p. 286.

48 Lloyd 2007, p. 699.

49 See Rose 992, pp. 102-103.



deformed by reciprocal self-relations'.<sup>50</sup>

Yet arguably Rose's assessment of the symbolic remains problematic, it being predicated almost entirely upon the lecture 'The Circuit' from *Seminar II* and the edited texts from *Seminar XX* translated by her sister.<sup>51</sup> Moreover she reads the latter text on sexuality back into the earlier text from *Seminar II* – thereby presenting his work in a synchronic manner which misses the development of concepts; hence her conclusion: the symbolic is a closed patriarchal system. What about the non-All?

Nonetheless, the *Broken Middle* provides for Rose the standpoint for the critique of political theology, and serves in advance of Žižek. As noted, both Rose and Žižek share a disdain for the political theology of Derrida, albeit whilst articulating one as such. Yet in Rose's work it remains a pejorative term. 'Holy middles' are mended middles and hence aversions to the law. Taking on the theological left in the form of Marc C. Taylor's *A/Theology*, and the theological right in the form of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* she shows how both offer a flight from the middle. In the case of Taylor's postmodern *a/theology* we are offered a philosophical approach based upon the gesture of a violent transgression in the usurpation of existing law – the death of metaphysics and the constitution of a new law. In the case of John Milbank (whose work draws heavily upon *Hegel contra Sociology* and *Dialectic of Nihilism*),<sup>52</sup> the argument is forwarded that properly speaking theology is a social theory, one in which we are promised liberation from social and political dominium in some 'expectant city'.

However, as Rose puts it, between the two we are slung between 'ecstasy and eschatology, the promise of touching our own most singularity [Taylor] and the irenic holy city [Milbank], precisely without

50 Rose 1996, p. 75.

51 See Mitchell and Rose 1982.

52 In *Theology and Social Theory* (1996a) Rose was the Blackwell reader for *Theology and Social Theory*. In the book Milbank develops Rose's critique of neo-Kantian sociology and in particular its reduction of religion to the immanent plane. He adopts a genealogical method to show how the sociological, political, and economic positioning of religion is only achieved to the degree those disciplines mask their theological leanings, and that properly speaking theology is a social theory. The difference between secular and theological versions is the former's arbitrary commitment to a version of the will-to-power, as opposed to the primacy of charity.

any disturbing middle.'<sup>53</sup>

It would not be difficult on this basis to fashion a Rose tinted critique of Žižek along the lines of her critique of political theology, before doing so let us rehearse Žižek's political theology.

### Žižek's Political Theology

Žižek's political theology takes its orientation from Hegel's kenotic logic (God's self-emptying). 'What dies on the cross is indeed God himself; not just his 'finite container''<sup>54</sup> but the God of the beyond – the God of metaphysics. Thereafter 'Spirit' names the community of believers, the purely corporal body of the church; that is to say, the realization of the cross is the release it brings from transcendence, making it homologous to Hegel's 'night of the world'. Translated into the concerns of Marx, kenosis provided the basis for the political gesture, ending 'obfuscation and fetishization, and liberation into the inexplicable joy and suffering of the world.'<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, Žižek goes as far as to suggest that theology offers the first critique of ideology in the biblical figure of Job.<sup>56</sup> Confronted with his suffering Job refuses the justifications offered by his theological interlocutors, they seek only to give a sense of metaphysical meaning to his suffering (e.g. you suffer in this life because...); rather, Job maintains fidelity to the very meaninglessness of suffering to the extent that even God cannot explain it. And because Žižek reads Job topologically, i.e. as the precursor to Christ,<sup>57</sup> he is able to further claim that Christ's cry of dereliction upon the cross is the point at which God faces up to his own powerlessness: God is an atheist.<sup>58</sup>

So while Žižek agrees with Marx that all criticism begins with the critique of religion, he is subsequently able to claim that theology contains a subversive materialist core through its incarnational logic

53 Rose 1992, p. 285. Rose was the Blackwell reader for Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*. The Rose archives at Warwick include the letters Milbank and Rose exchanged on the subject. In particular she pushed him to clarify the nature of the subject which underpinned *Theology and Social Theory*. In response Milbank wrote 'The Sublime in Kierkegaard', Milbank 1996.

54 Žižek and Milbank 2009, p. 257.

55 O'Regan 2010, p. 283.

56 Žižek 2003, p. 124.

57 Žižek 2003, p. 122.

58 Žižek 2003, p. 14.

which releases Christianity into the world; and through which Marxism must pass to achieve revolutionary praxis.

In practical political terms this translates into what Žižek calls politics proper: ‘a politics of the *act*, i.e. an act of symbolic dereliction.’<sup>59</sup> This is not politics as administration, as Žižek says, ‘there is no ethical act proper without taking the risk of such a momentary ‘suspension of the big Other,’ of the socio-symbolic network that guarantees the subject’s identity’<sup>60</sup>; i.e. a ‘self-destructive act [kenotic] could clear the terrain for a new beginning’<sup>61</sup>

However from Rose’s perspective, Žižek’s politics of transgression concerns only the foundation of law, the event as such, and therefore an evasion of law, a holy middle. Indeed, Žižek goes as far as to suggest that the heroic gesture of God’s kenotic love ultimately awaits Christianity: ‘in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself.’<sup>62</sup>

We can further develop Rose’s critique by returning to her general critique of French thought: ‘the whole of recent French philosophy is melancholic’. Drawing on Freud distinction between mourning and melancholia she claims that ‘they see life as founded on absence that we’re always illegitimately trying to make present.’ In Lacan for example, Rose claims Kierkegaardian repetition becomes twisted into the search for the lost object (*objet a*) within the concatenation of language.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, Žižek’s philosophy seeks to abolish representation and complete the translation of modern metaphysics into ontology via the non-All. By contrast the work of mourning suggests that in our confrontations with violence we take up the task of justice and political action with ‘renewed and reinvigorated for participation, ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city.’<sup>64</sup>

If Rose’s work can be considered political theology it is for three reasons: first, because she takes the speculative relation between

59 Žižek 1999, p. 246.

60 Žižek 1999, p. 263-264.

61 Žižek 2000, p. 151. Arguably the violence of his language is tempered in subsequent fashioning of ethics. Adopting the language of Bartleby the Scrivener he advocates the suspension of the big Other through a passive withdrawal from the symbolic networks, encapsulated by the line “*I prefer not to.*”

62 Žižek 2003, p. 171.

63 Rose 1992, pp. 102-104

64 Rose 1996, p. 36.

religion and the state as *the* constitutive antinomy of modernity; second, because the social import of the Hegelian Absolute implies the totality of culture and as such religion; and third because she claims the philosophical legitimacy of the universal. When later pushed on the particular question ‘*So you believe in something outside of the spatio-temporal continuum?*’ she replied, ‘Certainly, yes. But I think one has to preserve agnosticism about it. I love what Simone Weil said, that agnosticism is the most truly religious position. You must be able to say you don’t know. Agnosticism is the only true religion because to have faith is not to give up knowledge, but to know where the limit of knowledge is.’ This, I wager, is not the wishy-washy agnosticism of the undecided, but of a commitment to our ‘existing cities’ as an expression of the middle and the justice it serves through critique.

Comedy and Law

In her critique of postmodern ethics of otherness which she characterised as melancholic, Rose argued that we need to inaugurate a process of mourning, which ‘requires a relation to law that is presented by the *comedy of absolute spirit* as found in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.’<sup>65</sup> What does she mean precisely? As we saw, against post-structuralism she claimed all dualistic relations to the other (e.g. an ethics posited in terms of self/Other) are ‘attempts to quieten and deny the broken [dirempted] middle, the third term which arises out of misrecognition.’<sup>66</sup> This ‘third term’ is law which arises out of the very misrecognition: ‘My relation to myself is mediated by what I recognise or refuse to recognise in your relation to yourself; while your self-relation depends on what you recognise of my relation to myself’<sup>67</sup> ‘The law, ‘in all its various historical adventures – [is] the comedy of misrecognition.’<sup>68</sup> And this makes the meaning of *law* inseparable from the meaning of *Bildung*, i.e. education, formation, and cultivation.

Returning then to Hegel she says ‘As a propaedeutic to politics, I offer *the comedy of absolute spirit as inaugurated* mourning: the recognition of our failures of full mutual recognition, of the law which has induced our proud and deadly dualism, of the triune law – implicit but actual –

65 Rose 1996, p. 74.

66 Rose 1996, p. 75.

67 Rose 1996, p. 75.

68 Rose 1996, p. 75.

which is always at stake.’<sup>69</sup>

In short, and drawing upon John Baldacchino’s insights into Rose: ‘If Spirit embodies the drama of misrecognition, comedy ensures that history remains contingent, and reason full of surprises. Law looks to comedy as the becoming of possibilities that allow us to engage in life’s contingencies.’<sup>70</sup>

Political Theology and Comedy

How then are we to understand the link between political theology and comedy? What both Žižek and Rose accomplish is a non-foundational reading of Hegel which links comedy and theology to social critique by way of the speculative standpoint. In Rose’s work the speculative standpoint is synonym for the *broken middle*; in Žižek’s work – I would wager – it can be construed in terms of the real of existence (the symbolic real): the constitutive moment of anxiety within law in a way which as yet may prove to furnish Rose’s thought. Moreover, both offer a path to revitalise social critique in a way which avoids the traps of Kant’s legacy within Marxist social thought (i.e. transcendental arguments for society); maintaining instead a commitment to a political critique of the economy. Yet both offer radical alternatives encapsulated in their respective question on God: agnosticism versus Christian atheism; law versus the symbolic. In the former comedy provokes the awareness of misrecognitions which beset our historical development, which is held yet within the tension between the universal and the singular. In the later comedy provokes a more dramatic and materialist rendering of the situation – an ontology of non-All – with the political aim of founding a new universal. Hence Žižek’s comic approach remains entirely transgressive, one which seeks a fundamental shift in the symbolic situation as such in an attempt – if not to think beyond the cultural hegemony of capitalism – to carve out the space for such a new beginning.

However, we can refract this argument through psychoanalytic terms as Natalija Bonic has done in discussion of Zupan i ’s work: the aim of psychoanalysis [and by extension politics] is not to ‘bring about a shift of perspective, in the sense of a profound transformation of how we perceive the world. It is rather part of comic practice that functions

69 Rose 1996, p. 76.

70 Baldacchino 2012, p. 190.

through endless repetition and doubling, the aim of which is to allow two mutually exclusive (and under ordinary circumstances only alternately visible) realities appear side by side, so as to reveal the gap that unites and separates them.’<sup>71</sup> Or to put it in explicitly theological terms: what if salvation does not simply promise a form of deliverance from suffering (a cure of sorts), but by removing the limit that separates it from joy; a case of what Latin Church would call *godimento*?

For Rose this would constitute a comedy which has nothing to do with the ironic comedy of postmodernism, caught forever in its peculiar melancholy that seeks the lost object it never had in the first place. Nor is this the transgressive comedy which, with Nietzsche, heralds a new law. Rather, as she says: ‘Comedy is homeopathic: it cures folly by folly. Yet anarchy exposed and enjoyed presupposes a minimal just order [...]. Suffering can be held by laughter which is neither joyful nor bitter: the loud belly laughter, with unmoved eyes, from North Carolina; the endless sense of the mundane hilarious of one who goes to Mass every day.’<sup>72</sup>

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